



Voices from Montana Solitary

Inmates in solitary confinement at Montana State Prison and the Montana Women's Prison describe solitary in their own words.

Loneliness and despair

"I live in a box. . . Imagine being locked in your bathroom but instead of a tub there's a bed. . . . It's a very dehumanizing experience to suffer living like this for months. I've been doing it for years trying to survive."
– William

"I try to ignore the madness around me, but it's suffocating and relentless. Sitting on my bed hearing others screaming out their doors, banging and kicking, flooding their cells because it's the only way they know to express their suffering. It's hard not to let this affect you. Depression is rampant throughout this building. It's hard to stay positive. Every day I battle just to stay sane and keep my wits as others around me are broken down mentally... I have become extremely paranoid as I keep withdrawing from people becoming more and more antisocial as the time goes... Unfortunately for some this style of living is too much to handle and they look for escape through suicide. Some succeed. If you are treated and you live like an animal, how long before you start to believe that you are no longer human?" – William

"Sometimes it's so quiet you can hear and feel your own thoughts. Sometimes I just talk to break the silence... Inmates who come into the hole for the first time, it's hard on them. They want out. They cry. They plead with whomever passes by for mental help, hoping for some type of reassurance." – Jena

Psychological effects

"Since being here I have changed dramatically, I never knew what anxiety was. Unfortunately I am now very familiar with it. I have become extremely paranoid as I keep withdrawing from people becoming more and more antisocial as the time goes on. The worst part is I'm also familiar with another feeling – hate – such a strong word and powerful emotion making my outlook on life bitter and nasty." William.

"I feel that I've become more paranoid. . . Sometimes I feel that I can't make it out on the floor, when I first started my solitary time it was hard on my brain. I was angry and I held onto it feeling that the c/o's were trying to break me and mold me into something or keep pushing me to keep me back here. . . Solitary confinement is very difficult mentally." Jena

Physical effects

"Whenever I am in solitary confinement I get severe headaches that persist no matter what kind of medication I take to alleviate the pain. I also cannot seem to gain any weight in solitary confinement. I always lost about 10 pounds as soon as I get locked up and then just stay at a consistent weight after that." – Frank

"I've noticed a lot of physical issues. Your aches become worse. You get kinks in your neck which causes headaches. I clench my teeth, grind them when I sleep. There seems to be no ventilation. I've had plenty of sinus problems, loss of weight (that I can't gain back)... I see a lot of ladies who will pick at themselves out of boredom, and infections happen." – Jena

Relentless boredom

"Over the years family members have asked me to describe my average day and I have always skirted the question by telling them to watch 'Groundhog Day' and then picture that movie taking place in a bathroom." – Frank

"For me the biggest deviation from my routine comes when I just don't feel like doing anything at all. Sometimes I just lay on my bed and stare at the ceiling or out the window. Those are the times when days or weeks go by where I don't do anything." – Frank

The one hour out of the cell

"I'm handcuffed and escorted to what they call a recreation yard. To me it's nothing but a really big dog kennel. This cage they put us in is surrounded by concrete walls and the ceiling is covered with a mesh net you can't really see through." – William

Cold, hungry and smelly

"You are not allowed to buy items from the canteen as the rest of the population. Things like clothes to stay warm or food items so that you are not starving at night are not allowed. We can't even buy hygiene items like lotion to avoid dry skin." – William